DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 217 CS 208 060

AUTHOR Zemelman, Steven
TITLE A Debate about Writing, and How Gregory Bateson Helps Deal with It.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983). For related documents, see CS 208 060-062.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Philosophy; Educational Theories; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Responsibility; Teaching Methods; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Bateson (Gregory); Stochastics

ABSTRACT

In order to encourage teachers to allow students to explore and discover larger patterns in their work, including their mental growth beyond their immediate performance, this paper recommends the philosophy of Gregory Bateson as a teaching approach. The first principle considered in the paper is that a mental process requires circular or more complex chains of determination, with the mind acting as a self-correcting mechanism. Compared to the writing process, the qualities of recursiveness and time order are linked to levels of complexity and the interrelationship of parts. Next, it considers the stochastic process as found in learning and composing, deeming it central to structuring information in the mind and in nature. The third principle discussed in the paper is the hierarchy of logical types, in which speakers send messages about the nature of their messages that may sometimes conflict with the message, thus creating paradox. The paper argues that students do not learn principles of composition because of the contrary messages sent and the abstract requirements established by teachers. It also argues that by using Bateson's framework, teachers can encourage more honest and effective student writing. (CRH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED245217

A Debate About Writing, and How Gregory Bateson Helps Deal with It

Steven Zemelman

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Steven Zemelman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 208 060

A Debate About Writing, and How Gregory Bateson Helps Deal with It

Steven Zemelman

A major division has been growing subtly among those of us who write and do research about the teaching of composition. It is particularly complex because we as teachers can benefit from ideas propounded by both sides of the split, yet finding a perspective that encompasses both is difficult. I want to describe this division and then review ideas from a writer outside the field of composition, Gregory Bateson, which can help us gain the larger perspective we need.

The division I speak of can be most clearly seen by comparing statements from two well-known writers on composition, Linda Flower and James Moffett. Here's Flower:

> The first premise of this book is that writing is not simply a game of chance you play with your muse. Writing is a thinking process. To be more specific, it is a problem-solving process.
> . . . . .
> This book is about the kind of writing people do when they know something they want to communicate to a reader who wants or needs to hear it.
> [Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing, p..3.]

Now Moffett:

> . . . . if practiced as real authoring, not disguised playback, writing discovers as much as it communicates.
> . . . . .
> . . . . what mostly gives us the feeling of richness, beauty, and originality, I submit, owes, precisely to our managing to escape a while from the cage. We would best regard fresh perception and original thinking as unthinking prior thoughts that were not so or were too partial.
> [Coming on Center, p. 167.]

To summarize, Moffett points out that one must silence the inner voice which repeats to us the cliches and concepts we hear constantly in our life in order to find a new way of seeing. Some disorder is necessary in our thinking.

Perhaps you sense I'm critical of Flower. I admit it, and I want to make my objections clear. James Britton pictures writing as a tool for learning--

learning both about specific subjects and learning in the sense of growth and maturation, change in one's world view. I believe this is a vital goal, and one too easily lost sight of, nowadays. This isn't merely an "affective" issue. When students discover new views of the world, they also discover new energy in themselves, and are more likely to write informative pieces that are clear and exciting. Students who go through the motions, producing term papers because teachers order term papers, learn less and produce more mechanical results. In writing, immediate "problem-solving" is influenced by a larger context of purpose and audience--not just the supposed purpose of the piece, but the real larger purposes affecting the student's actions in his or her life. Moffett aims to hook up with this larger view. Flower does not, and as a consequence encourages a continuation of the widespread approach to writing as "practice," as drills and performance for grades--even though she stresses the importance of "audience" in the particular act of writing itself.

I'd like to suggest Gregory Bateson as one writer-theorist who outlines concepts of mind and language which can help relate expressive and transactional writing, narrower aims of control and larger aims of growth. I want to review some of Bateson's ideas, to show how they connect with recent thoughts about the writing process, supporting them, providing a clear basis for criticizing them, and relating them with a larger theory.

For those not acquainted with him, Bateson was an anthropologist who worked with Margaret Mead, turned his interest to psychology, particularly the study of schizophrenia and the family, and then finally to philosophy. Bateson was fascinated with language, epistemology, and the question of how information is structured. He perceived wide-ranging connections between information flow in a family (leading to schizophrenia), in biology (not only

in terms of DNA, but also in the mechanics of biological evolution), in cybernetics and in the problem of what constitutes an adequate description in a difficult science like anthropology. All such information flow follows the same patterns, he realized.

In seeing such connections, Bateson not only described psychological and social phenomena with great perception, but provided a powerful framework for organizing ideas. Such a framework is especially needed in research on composition, to mold isolated experiments and partial models into a larger picture.

The first principle we shall consider is that "mental process requires circular or more complex chains of determination." What this means is that Bateson sees the mind as a self-correcting mechanism, somewhat like a motor with a governor on it. In such a structure, things work in circles--if the flywheel runs faster, the governor whirls faster, its arms spread out, lowering the fuel supply, slowing down the motor and the governor, etc. Such a system can run in a steady state, race out of control or slow to a stop, depending on the relationships among all the parts. This structure may also contain "switches," which are rather special mechanisms. A switch does not of itself put energy into a system, but only lets energy flow through, or controls it. Think of a light switch or water faucet: the electricity or water pressure comes from somewhere else beside the switch itself.

In comparing this model to the writing process, what quickly comes to mind is the recursiveness stressed in recent descriptions, the tendency of writers to repeat steps executed earlier, and to re-evaluate the work already done. Bateson's thinking is very much in tune with recent thought about composition. However, his model of interrelating parts and switches suggests a level of complexity greater than some of the recent descriptions of the writing process

which focus primarily on the time order of operations when they speak of recursiveness. Bateson stresses the interrelationship of parts, pointing out that engineers were unable to design effective governors for machines until new mathematical equations were developed to include all the parts at once. Recursiveness means that the very hierarchy of mental activities--of which activity influences which--can be altered. The writing process will thus be governed, in part, by its role in this larger human process--but will itself also alter the larger process.

The idea of "switches" in a self-governing mechanism can help us see how easily the larger matter of world-view becomes involved in writing. A memory or thought often triggers other thoughts which are fueled by their own energy. The moment such a trigger connects an immediate writing topic to a more generalized belief the writer holds, then the direction of the writing is no longer determined by just the immediate demands of problem-solving. This switching also easily brings into play the writer's view of himself and of the process he is carrying out as he writes.

Bateson's model of mental operation reminds us of the breadth and variety of the inner speech involved in writing. Our picture of such self-correcting mechanisms must combine some order that involves problem-solving and a more complex activity in which any thought can be either part of the flow of writing or a release that leads to a new set of ideas. In developing theories to make sense of the writing process, we must continue to be awed by its complexity. As Moffett says, "A native language is enmeshed in the vast and intricate fabric of interpersonal and intrapersonal life."

One of the major forces that influences the switching and self-correcting processes of the mind is expressed in a second of Bateson's principles--that "In mental process, the effects of difference are to be regarded as transforms

of the differences which preceded them." This is another way to state Korzybski's famous dictum, "The map is not the territory." As James Britton has further developed this concept, when we use language we construct meaning using concepts available to us for organizing data, rather than simply "perceiving" information out in the world. Those who theorize about writing are fond of quoting this idea, for it seems to justify the importance of writing and to describe the power writing has in developing thought. However, we do not always consider the full implications of the idea, and Bateson explores them much more deeply.

First, we have to ask this: if the map is not the territory, then how does a writer (or any user of language) decide what is an appropriate map? The answer is not immediately obvious. We think of explanations in transactional writing as "logical," as "cognitive." Bateson shows that they are not. For example, listeners usually look for a redundancy that doesn't seem truly necessary, and we really have no explanation for why such redundancy is required.

Bateson goes on to propose a scheme for what does seem to comprise a convincing explanation. Bateson introduces what he calls "stochastic process." What this means is a system involving random events, but with some act of selection that makes use of only certain of them. The choice of what information is used, in other words, always includes elements of unpredictability.

Stochastic process is, Bateson points out, central to the structuring of information in both mind and nature. Stochastic processes are found in learning and composing as well. Except in the most ritualistic repetition, there must be some newness, some random element, a stimulus from the outside or a re-shuffling of thoughts, a random search through the memory, internally. Then the test of a new idea depends on whether it fits internally with the person's previous

learning, and/or whether it fits well with the external world the person deals with.

Just one kind of coding process can involve greater or lesser amounts of randomness, and can be more nearly externally or internally limited. One kind of coding, for instance, Bateson calls "part for the whole coding." It's name makes clear what it is, and it is readily to be seen in writing. As a result of it, students often feel that "The words don't say all that I really mean." Or another way they experience it is in the uncertainty, "Among all this information, since I can't tell everything, which items do I choose and how do I know when I've told enough?"

There is, neatly enough, another major element Bateson explores that helps us to think about this question of priorities and selection, and about why the larger issue of writing for learning and growth can be neglected only at our peril, even in a practical writing course. This element is expressed in Bateson's principle that "Operations of mind disclose a hierarchy of logical types." What Bateson refers to is the paradox, which in one famous version goes "Epimenides was a Cretan who said 'Cretans always lie.'" The question, of course, is "Was he telling the truth?" The point is that speakers send messages about the nature of their messages, and when the two kinds of messages conflict, paradox and confusion can result. And as Bateson had already discovered in his previous work, when individuals are made sufficiently confused about how to take a message, their behavior becomes what we call "insane." Bateson named this phenomenon the "double bind."

Such binding can be seen in writing as well, where the writer will incorporate not only information about a topic but also indications about how that information is to be taken. Is it a joke? An argument? An "as if" exercise? An evasion of the teacher's real request? The writer also receives implicit messages

about the nature of the writing task in a context such as school. What is the expected relation between teachers and students? What is the assignment really for? (For a grade? For the teacher to prove to the students that he's "tough"? To keep students busy? To lead students to ask questions and discover ideas? To eliminate some students from school?) In examining students' testimony about their writing processes, one can observe how much contexts influence the way writers shift their attention during the writing process. In a short experiment, I asked students to write about a bumper sticker or other sign or slogan they had seen recently, and then to describe, in writing, the composing process they had gone through. Here is what one student wrote:

> If you really want to know what I saw, here it is: (I can't believe this) it was a T-shirt that read "musicians use the rhythm method." Hey, I know it's crude, but it really caught my eye since I am a musician and many other musicians I know have dirty minds. This saying was really appropriate in that context. The other less nasty bumper sticker I saw was "Save the Rice Farm." At first, I thought it was some outrageous joke because it seems to me that the world is abundant with rice. Later I found out it was referring to some specific farm in Illinois that was about to be destroyed or something like that.

Her explanation of the process for this was as follows:

> Boy, will I be honest! After going though a dilemma as to whether or not I should include the T-shirt saying, I laughed to myself and thought, "go ahead." When I got to the part about musicians, two young men came into mind immediately (for their sake as well as mine, they shall be nameless). Then I decided to include something nice so you wouldn't get the wrong impression of me. I got bored writing the second one [i.e., example], so I started to think about John and how upset and dismayed I am because of our last encounter. In fact, I am thinking about him right now and I'm not fully concentrating on this assignment even though it's amusing to me.

Especially striking is the student's need, because of the context, that is because of my presence, to shift concerns so markedly that the unity--and her own interest--in the essay is destroyed.

The issues of context are many and include "cognitive" matters just as much as "affective" ones. Even if, for example, a teacher arranges for other students to be an audience for student writing, it makes a considerable difference whether students are comparing essays to see whose is best, reading to hunt for errors, reading as interested bystanders, or comparing data as fellow inquirers.

There isn't space to explore here all the aspects of context, but I want to consider one that seems especially important and that often leads to subtle contradictions in the teaching of writing.

Writing of any serious amount means authoring, taking initiative and claiming possession and responsibility for a set of words. If a teacher asks for such initiative, but then signals through channels other than the writing assignment that he will exercise authority arbitrarily, that aspects of the students' work are required more to satisfy abstract "requirements" than to promote clearer communication, or that he is mainly interested in seeing a repetition of his own words, then he contradicts himself. He has asked for initiative and then warned against it.

I've seen this happen very often with teachers, even well-meaning teachers who want to take a "writing process" approach and who sincerely wish to help students write better. Students are extremely sensitive to this contradiction, for they've often been sandbagged before--invited to express their own ideas in their writing and then punished when they did so.

This is an absolutely fundamental issue in a writing class, for if students are focused only on "giving the teacher what she wants," they don't learn principles about writing process or about what works and what doesn't in communication between a reader and a writer. This confusion about the central purposes for students' work pushes intself into every interaction between student and teacher: "Tell us what you want!"

And how does one move it out of the way? Not just with verbal assurances to students about one's sincerity, for these simply fit into the picture of the dangerous situation--"Even though he encourages, be careful what you say!" A teacher of writing must signal through repeated actions within the structure of the course--assignments, responses, grades, classroom activities--that she has a larger goal in mind, that students' exploration and discovery of larger patterns within their work, that is their mental growth, matters, and not just immediate performance. Otherwise, even "writing process" can be turned back into rote exercise if the context gives contradictory signals.

This, then, is the greatest problem I see in Linda Flower's approach, and in others that emphasize problem-solving. They do not exclude writing for oneself, for learning and discovery. But they do not speak at all to the issue of context, to why one is even attempting to solve a particular problem, and they appear to imply that if only instructors focus on writing process, student success will be assured.

Bateson's discussion of information flow in mind and in biological life emphasizes context most explicitly. And when we put the parts of Bateson's theory together, we get a powerful whole. The complexity of a self-correcting mechanism and the choices created by a coding system that always includes randomness as well as order--these show us how it is that our minds are in fact so sensitive to context.

Bateson's framework helps us to see how much work has been needed to understand the writing process, and why it is that the researchers have taken off in so many directions at once. All are needed, none has been sufficient in itself. With work in so many areas, however, we do seem ready for more over-arching theory, and work on the separate parts may at some point no longer be satisfying. We can use thinkers like Bateson to help complete the picture.